

FLAMES OF DESTINY IV: BALEFIRE

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Summary: I lied when I said FoD 3 was my favorite. THIS one is! My fanfics are told as if they are the facts that we as viewers just didn't know about bc the events happened in secret. But this is my total Zutara "what if". Best part is I keep it as part of the story! Zuko & Katara visit the Dream Giving spirit for a chance to live what their lives would have been had they stayed together

1. Chapter 1: MELTDOWN

CHAPTER 1: MELTDOWN

Katara, Bumi, and Kya finally arrived in the Fire Nation. It had been a long sea voyage, seeing how Aang had taken Appa and Tenzin and flew off for airbending training again. It was three years since Aang and Katara discovered that Tenzin was an airbender. Now Tenzin was an excitable and quick witted boy of nearly four years. He reminded her a lot of Aang when he was a kid. Tenzin had a natural aptitude for airbending, but he was not as devoted as Kya had been to developing her bending, to Aang's great frustration. The first time Aang had taken Tenzin for one of his training trips, Tenzin had been only two years old. He felt that Tenzin wasn't connecting to his Air Nomad heritage because he hadn't been in the proper surroundings. After all, all Air Nomad children were raised in the air temples and often visited areas with great spiritual energy. Also, roaming the world freely with no inhibitions was an essential part of Air Nomad philosophy. Before Aang turned 12 he had already traveled the world several times over. Katara had argued that Tenzin was only a two year old, a baby still, and that was why he would rather play than train, but Aang heard none of it. He said that Tenzin was the future of airbending and that the world needed him to learn in order to be truly balanced and that was that.

Every year, Aang, Katara, and their children would visit Zuko for his birthday. He and Aang were still good friends. But this year he ran off with Tenzin a few weeks before. Bumi and Kya stubbornly refused the notion of simply sending a nice letter instead of seeing their "Uncle Zuzu" in person. Of course, Katara had no idea how they would

get there in time. It was the stormy season so they couldn't even hop an air balloon for fear of being swept away. Luckily, Zuko was nice enough to send an imperial class ship to the South Pole to get them. When the ship docked, Katara planted her feet on the ground and took a huge gulp of fresh air. It had stormed pretty badly for most of the journey and they had been required to stay in the quarters below deck. Not to mention, they arrived a few days after Zuko's birthday. But now that they were in the Fire Nation though, the skies were clear and the sweltering summer heat warmed the chill she had in her bones. "Lady Katara", bowed an imperial guard. "Your escort awaits". Katara smiled. Zuko had sent a royal escort worthy of Fire Nation royalty to greet her and the children and bring them to the palace.

Zuko and Izumi were there to welcome them to the palace, but the Fire Lady was not. Kya and Izumi flew into each other's arms. After all the greetings and hugs and pleasantries were exchanged, Katara and the children were shown to their usual rooms and given baths and changes of clothes. Kya, Bumi, and Izumi ran off to play and spar with each other and Katara and Zuko sat in a promenade in one of the gardens having tea. "I'm sorry we missed your birthday", said Katara after taking a sip. "The weather was against us". Zuko waved the idea away. "No need to apologize", he smiled. "How are you and the kids doing?". Katara hesitated. "Aang is always taking off with Tenzin for some sort of training or visits to air temples and spiritual grounds. He's still so young—he should be with all of us; his mother and his brother and sister. I'm afraid that he won't bond with them". "I know", said Zuko regretfully. "I tried talking to him. It seems like he wants Tenzin to be a master air bender before he reaches five years old". "Which is ridiculous", Katara added. Zuko shrugged. "Kya became a master waterbender at age six". Katara smiled at the pride in his voice at his daughter's prodigiousness. She felt the pride as well. But she also felt annoyance with Aang and concern for her youngest son. "Yes, but he can't force it on him like that! Kya mastered water bending because it came easily for her. Aang is putting too much pressure on Tenzin, and worse: he's alienating him from his siblings".

Zuko nodded in agreement. She was right. "I can try talking to him again", he suggested. "You can try, but he isn't listening to anyone". She sighed. "The whole point of this was so I could manage him. But it seems like I'm losing my touch after all these years". "I think that for so long all he wanted was to ensure the survival of airbending and Air Nomad culture, that now that he has an actual chance, it's consuming him", said Zuko reasonably. "It's not fair to Tenzin though", said Katara shortly. "And it's not fair to Bumi and Kya. They're missing out on time with their father and brother". "Not to mention Aang is neglecting his duty to be a father to Bumi and Kya", said Zuko irritably. It was bad enough that Bumi was being neglected, but the idea of Aang neglecting Kya burned him up like paper in a flame. "(Z) It's true that Kya is my daughter, but Aang doesn't know that! "Bumi asked me if their dad doesn't care about them anymore because they aren't airbenders", said Katara sadly. Zuko shook his head. "I don't know what he's thinking. He can't just pretend he doesn't have other kids just because he has one airbending son!". He paused. "Has he ever mentioned his suspicions of Kya again?". Katara shook her head. "No, he hasn't. He definitely was suspicious, especially after the New Moon Festival when Kya bended during the lunar eclipse three years ago, but he never mentioned anything". "Could he possibly even know?", asked Zuko. "I mean, she

waterbended either way. She can't firebend or anything. And anyway he can't just neglect them off of suspicion alone". Katara shrugged. "Maybe Uncle could try to reason with him?", she suggested feebly. "I don't know who else could talk sense into him". "Well if you want to talk to Uncle about this, you're in luck", smiled Zuko. "I asked him to come to the palace a few days ago". Katara smiled at the thought of seeing Iroh again. "Really? How come?". Zuko gestured towards a tattered old book that was sitting on the table. "Earth King Kuei sent this to me for my birthday". Katara squinted to examine the book. "The Tome of Spirits", she read aloud. "What's that about?". "Scholars discovered it at Ba Sing Se University while they were renovating the libraries. "They think it's one of the oldest books in the world". "Well that isn't a surprise", remarked Katara, eyeing the dingy cover and yellowed pages.

Zuko laughed shortly. "Well I thought it would be of interest to Uncle. He's been to the Spirit World before, you know". Katara nodded. "I knew the rumors. So have you read anything?". "A little", said Zuko honestly. "I'm so nervous about turning these pages. The book feels so fragile. But it seems like it's a sort of catalogue of all of the spirits known to man". Katara's eyes widened with interest. "Wow. There must be thousands of entries. But I wonder why Earth King Kuei would gift that to you specifically. That seems like it would have been more up Aang's alley". Zuko nodded. "Well, supposedly, it was written by a firebending Avatar who was also a Firelord". He gingerly turned the book on its back. "See those symbols? They're the same ones in the temples of the Fire Sages". Katara examined the back of the book with interest. "The writing is strange", she observed. "It's an old version of our writing system", said Zuko. "I think it says something about the Firelord scroll?", asked Katara. "You're right. That's what it roughly translates to. It's supposed to be the Book of the Firelord". Katara smiled. "Oh".
(K)__**Of course Zuko would know the translation. He studied ancient writings and language since childhood!**_ "But why this be a book for the Firelord?". "Well, after the first Fire Lord drove the warlords away in ancient times, the Fire Sages were created for spiritual leadership. Supposedly, that Firelord was a Fire Sage but he was just the first and most spiritual among them". Katara nodded. The Fire Nation had come a long way away from that! They were interrupted by a servant who bowed low. "Excuse me my Lord, my Lady. General Iroh has arrived in the Fire Nation". Zuko smiled. "Good. Have the guards send a royal escort to bring him to the palace at once". The servant bowed and ran off.

After a few minutes, Zuko and Katara called the children to them to head to the palace entrance to welcome Iroh. When the escort arrived, as soon as he exited the carriage, Zuko embraced his uncle hard. "I've missed you Uncle!". "I have missed you as well, my nephew". Izumi scurried over to him and Iroh scooped her up in a hug. "Every time I see you, you are taller and more beautiful than the last". Izumi smiled brightly and buried her face in his neck. "I'm so happy you're here Uncle!". Iroh set her down and smiled at Katara and her children. "And what a wonderful surprise!", he remarked, arms wide and heading towards her. "Katara". He hugged her warmly. "And these little ones! Or should I say big ones!", he smiled at Bumi and Kya. "I heard that you are becoming quite the swordsman". Bumi nodded cheerfully. At thirteen, he was already taller than Iroh. He turned to now nine year old Kya. "And you, little waterbending master. I hear that you have your own pupil now". "I do!", Kya nodded excitedly. "You will be a great bender one day, much like your

parents". He gave a secret smile to Zuko. "Uncle Iroh I have so much to tell you too!", exclaimed Izumi. Iroh smiled. "Why don't we go inside and have a nice chat over some tea?".

After tea, the children went back to play out in the gardens and Zuko, Katara, and Iroh sat inside with the Tome of Spirits. "It's also called the Book of the Firelord", explained Zuko. Iroh rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "I see. May I?". Zuko gently handed his uncle the book. Iroh flipped carefully through the pages. "Some of these are spirits I have never heard of", he murmured wonderingly. The colors were faded now, but it was obvious that this had once been a very vivid book. "I knew it would interest you", said Zuko smiling. "Yes, nephew. This is indeed a remarkable discovery. I am surprised the professors at Ba Sing Se University parted with it so easily". "Did they even mention the finding in Ba Sing Se?", asked Katara. Iroh shook his head. "The first I heard of this book was when Zuko sent a letter to me about it". "Maybe they thought it belonged in one of the temples of the Fire Sages", suggested Zuko. Iroh shrugged. "I could not say". He yawned and stretched. Zuko smiled indulgently. "You look tired Uncle, and I know the journey was long. Why don't you go ahead to your rooms and take a rest?". Iroh stood up. "Yes, I could probably use some rest. A man needs his rest". "Here. You can take the book too", said Zuko passing it to him.

Once Iroh left Zuko and Katara sat in silence for a little bit before a messenger hawk cawed loudly and landed on the stone table, flapping its wings urgently. Zuko and Katara exchanged a curious glance at each other before Zuko went ahead and removed the message. "It's addressed to you Katara. It's from Aang". "From Aang?!", she held out her hand instantly. All of a mother's worries came to her mind. ***(K)** ****_**I hope nothing's wrong with Tenzin! I hope he isn't sick! I hope he hasn't broken anything!**_** She hastily opened the letter and scanned the page quickly. "Is everything alright?", asked Zuko after a few moments. Katara's eyes were wide and roving the page quickly. She put her hand to her heart. "Tenzin is fine, thank goodness. And Aang says that...he found an ancient tribe off the southern coast of the Fire Nation, called the Bhanti Tribe. He says they have five adult sky bison!". "How is that even possible?", asked Zuko incredulously. It was common belief that when the air temples were attacked, the sky bison along with the Air Nomads had faded away. "I don't know!", said Katara, half excited and half distracted by reading. Suddenly she frowned. ***(Z)** ****_**I wonder what she just read.**_** Katara's whole demeanor changed. She dropped the letter and it gently fell to the table. "What is it Katara? What did he say?". Katara was silent. She just stared ahead of her, seeing nothing.

"Katara, talk to me!", said Zuko more urgently now. "What happened?". "It'sâ€¦Aang", said Katara in a tiny voice. "He saysâ€¦.he says that he has to take Tenzin into seclusion for a year, so he can trainâ€¦.so that by the time there are new air bison babies, he can choose one to be his animal guide". Katara's tone sounded as if she hardly believed what she had said. Zuko could hardly believe it either. "What?!", he exclaimed. He had never felt more confused. She had to have misread something, "Can I see the letter?", he asked, stretching his hand out. Katara nodded her head numbly and Zuko scooped the letter up. He quickly skimmed through.

"â€¦As you know, sky bison are a major part of Air Nomad culture. Every Air Nomad child has to go and choose his or her sky bison at

the age of five. Tenzin is four this year, but he hasn't had adequate training in order to fully make a spiritual connection with his air bison. I need to take him into seclusion for a year or so to meditate and prepare him for his lifetime spiritual friend. This is a very critical time, so we won't be able to correspond. We'll miss you all, and see you next year!

P.S.- Give the children my love and Tenzin's."

Zuko shook his head disbelievingly. "He can't be serious. He can't be!". Katara was still stunned silent. "Katara, say something", Zuko urged her. "What is there to say?", she asked in a near whisper. "What can I say?". A single tear streamed down her face. "He has my son, my baby, and I don't know where he's gone. If I send him messages, he won't respond!". Zuko felt his heart ache for her and Bumi and Kya as well. Now several tears were flowing freely and silently. "Zuko, what am I going to do? What can I tell Bumi and Kya? How can I say they won't see their father and brother for a year? How could he do this?!". She cupped her face in her hands and sobbed. Zuko wanted to take her in his arms, but they were too out in the open. "Katara", he was at a loss for words. ***(Z) What can I say to her? I have no idea what she should say to Bumi and Kya either!** She sat up and wiped her face in her hands and looked pleadingly at Zuko. "What should I do, Zuko?", she asked desperately. Zuko shook his head. "I'mâ€¦sorry Katara. I don't know". A small sob escaped her and she sniffled. "He can't do thisâ€¦", she started feebly. "He can't keep doing things like this!", she roared as she slammed her fist on the table. "He keeps leaving me with alone with two children to look after! I can't do this alone!". Zuko felt his insides contorting. He couldn't bear to see her so sad and confused.

"Katara, everything will be alright", said Zuko. His voice was choked up. "I'm so tired Zuko", Katara confided weakly. He suddenly remembered how years before she had told him the same thing on their journey to search for his mother. "He always leaves and I have to play both roles, mother and father. These kids are so bright and so intuitive. They know when something's wrong. I keep trying to make excuses as to why their father always leaves us all behind and takes Tenzin everywhere, but they only ever half believe me if even that". "I will do everything I can to help the three of you", said Zuko solemnly. "Youâ€¦you will?", asked Katara. Zuko nodded. "Of course! Why would I not? How could I not?! I love you Katara! And Kya is MY daughter. And Bumi is family to me as well". Katara gave him a small grateful smile as she held back the flowing tears. "Thank you, Zuko".

2. Chapter 2: COUJUE THE DREAM GIVER

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Later in the evening after dinner and after the kids were already in bed, Katara and Zuko went to Iroh's rooms. They sat on the two cushy chairs next to the desk Iroh was sitting at. Iroh was in scarlet dressing robes, pouring over the book. "Have you read anything interesting Uncle?", asked Zuko. "Yes. Several things", said Iroh pleasantly. "Like this". He pointed at the page he was on. Katara and Zuko leaned in closer. "This is the Fungi Spirit, Jun Wu". It looked like a giant mushroom. "I didn't even know there was a Fungi Spirit",

said Katara interestedly. "It would seem that there are many spirits we never knew existed", said Iroh. "What are these?", asked Zuko pointing to little pieces of scarlet ribbon sticking out of the book on various pages. "I have made markers of some of my more intriguing finds", said Iroh. "Why's this one silver?", asked Katara pointing to another ribbon closer to the back of the book. "Ah. This was one spirit that I have never heard of, and it has a most amazing ability". He handed the book to Katara and she opened to the page. "The Dream Creator?", she read questioningly. The old symbols were so difficult to read. "Yes", said Iroh. "The Dream Giving Spirit, Coujue". "What does the spirit do?", asked Zuko. "According to the book, this spirit allows people to live their dreams".

Katara and Zuko shared a glance. "What do you mean?", asked Katara. "The book says that Coujue is the spirit that allows us to dream. But also, if you visit Coujue in the Spirit World, she can allow you to live your dream or deepest wish. "That sounds too good to be true", said Zuko cautiously. "If this spirit can let you live your deepest wish, why wouldn't more people know about it? I would think people would've been going to Coujue for centuries". Iroh rubbed his chin. "Well it says that Coujue will allow you to live your dream, but only for a time. It also says that visitors to Coujue should exercise caution because she will try to entice you to remain in the Dream World". "The Dream World?", asked Katara. "It is a part of the Spirit World", explained Iroh. "But according to this, Coujue is the only one who can open the gateway". "What else does it say? Why does Coujue try to get people to stay in the dream world?", asked Katara. "It says that although Coujue is the Dream Giving Spirit, she also draws power from our dreams", said Iroh underlining the words with his finger. "When a person chooses to enter their dream in the Dream World, the dream is more powerful". Iroh looked up and smiled at Zuko and Katara's equally intrigued and bewildered expressions. "The Dream World is but a shadow of our world", he continued. "When we wake, our dreams have no consequence on our reality. However, if you were to visit the dream world, your dream would be reality".

"What happens if you decide to remain in the Dream World?", asked Zuko. Iroh scanned the page before responding. "It says that if a person chooses to remain in their dream, their spirit will never find peace when it is time for them to move on". "So that means a person can die in the Dream World?", asked Katara. Iroh nodded. "Everyone will reach the time when they must leave the world", said Iroh wisely. "But that doesn't make sense", said Zuko thoughtfully. "When you die in your dreams, most people simply wake up". Iroh smiled at Zuko. "Ah, yes. But when you have physically gone to the Dream World, what would you wake up to?". Zuko nodded at the logic. "So since the Dream World is your new reality, you have nowhere else to wake up to", said Katara. She shook her head. "I don't know why anyone would risk it, especially if Coujue will try to convince you to stay there. We all know how persuasive spirits can be". "People can live out their deepest desires as if they were reality. Desire is a powerful thing, wouldn't you agree?", said Iroh with a twinkle in his eyes. Katara and Zuko both felt their color rising. "But-But the danger!", exclaimed Katara quickly changing that subject. Zuko nodded in agreement although his cheeks were on fire. "You would be trapped until you died and your soul would be trapped forever. Is it really worth it?", she asked.

"People have their reasons. Some dream of their ambitions, some dream of their regrets. I think that there is probably a lure for people

with regrets", said Iroh evenly. "But why take the risk?", asked Katara. "Regret can be a prevailing and ongoing issue in a person's life. Everyone has moments where they wonder how things could have been if they had done one thing instead of another. I think that the more a decision alters the course of your life, the possibility and strength of regret is heightened". Katara and Zuko exchanged glances. Their lives had been drastically altered when they chose not to be together so many years ago. When they chose duty to the world over love. They had made the right decision—or at least they made the decision for the right reason. It had been a struggle from the beginning. At times, Zuko had felt like they made a grave mistake. So many times he had thought about how things could have been if he had waited to announce his betrothal to Katara. And of course, he often found himself caught in a daydream, fantasizing about what life with Katara could've been like. He loved his wife, but he yearned for Katara in a way he could never yearn for her. It always felt like a part of him was missing. Granted, Izumi brought so much joy into his life that he could not complain of unhappiness. Even his wife brought him joy. But he always had a sense of unfulfillment lingering inside.

"If someone wanted to—visit Coujue, how would they?", Zuko asked carefully. Katara turned a stunned expression to him, but Iroh just smiled his small all-knowing smile. "They would have to enter the Spirit World". Zuko frowned. "And—how do you do that?". "Why do you need to know?", asked Katara hotly. "I'm just asking!", Zuko replied calmly. Katara was eyeing him suspiciously by this point. "Well Sokka was abducted by an angry forest spirit once that took off into the Spirit World with him. Maybe you could try that". Zuko smirked at her. "I'm just asking for curiosity's sake Katara! How did you do it Uncle?". "After I lost my son, Lu-Ten—I felt like I had no purpose in the world", said Iroh, emotion creeping discreetly into his voice. "Uncle, you don't have to explain if it's too painful I-". Iroh put his hand up to stop him. "Please, I am alright". Zuko nodded. "At one time my greatest aspiration was to conquer Ba Sing Se", Iroh continued. "But when Lu Ten died I did not know what life there could be for me without my son". Zuko remembered. Iroh had forsaken the siege of Ba Sing Se and had not returned to the Fire Nation for some time. At that point he hadn't know that his uncle had actually visited the Spirit World. "I felt like I needed to go on a spiritual journey. I toured many sacred areas of the world and learned the true meaning of firebending. I had always felt a connection to the spirits ever since I was a boy so I sought to find solace and guidance with the spirits. I was told that there was a very spiritual place southwest of Ba Sing Se". "You must mean the Foggy Swamp", Katara injected. Iroh nodded. "Yes". He turned to Zuko. "I know you have never gone, but if you did you would feel the great amount of spiritual energy that is concentrated there".

Katara nodded her agreement. "Uncle Iroh, Huu told us that he sat under the giant tree at the center of the swamp and reached enlightenment through meditation. Were you able to meditate into the Spirit World?". Zuko cursed under his breath**. (Z) **_**If that's how he got there, I doubt I'll be able to follow suit.**_ Iroh shook his head and smiled. "No, I am afraid not. It was much simpler than that". Zuko ears pricked up at that. **(Z) **_**An easy way into the Spirit World?!**_ "You see, the Spirit World and the physical world are more connected than you think. The reason the Foggy Swamp is such a spiritual place is because it is the physical world reflection of the Tree of Time". "What's the Tree of Time?", asked Zuko. "It is a

tree at that is at the center of the Spirit World. The Tree of Time holds the entire history of the world". "So what happened that you were able to enter at the Tree of Time?", asked Zuko. "Was there some sort of portal at the tree in the swamp?". "A spirit guided me into the Spirit World through the tree". Zuko felt his anticipation die. "But you will never guess which spirit". "We know of the spirit that guided you to the Spirit World?", asked Katara. "Yes. And very well I might add", said Iroh. "It was Avatar Roku".

Katara and Zuko could not hide their shock. "But how? Aang was trapped in an iceberg at that time? How could it have been Roku?", asked Katara. "The physical body of the Avatar was trapped, but until such a time where Aang could connect to him, Roku's spirit was in the Spirit World". "What did he say to you?", asked Katara. "He showed me the Tree of Time. He showed me my son's life and all he did, the good and the bad. And he spoke of you, my nephew". "Me?", asked Zuko, confused. Iroh nodded. "He told me that you would face great danger in the near future, that your life was threatened. He also told me that there was promise in you but you would need guidance because you would soon lose your only protector. It was then that I realized, I did have something to live for. I had to be there to protect and guide you. You were already as dear to me as my own son, but I was blinded by my grief for Lu Ten". Zuko smiled at his uncle. For a few moments at least he forgot about his fixation with entering the Spirit World. "So then you went back to the Fire Nation?", asked Katara. "Yes", said Iroh. "But Roku suggested that I travel in the Spirit World. It's faster, you know". "So you were able to travel to the Fire Nation while in the Spirit World?". "In so many words", replied Iroh. "I had to travel to a place where there was a portal to the physical world".

Zuko's eyes widened. "There's a portal?!". Katara raised an eyebrow. "Uncle said that he came out of a portal, Zuko. He didn't say you could enter through it as well. It's possible it only works one way". Zuko grimaced and turned away from her piercing gaze. "What are you thinking anyway Zuko?", she inquired. "You can't want to visit this Coujue?". His grimace deepened before he turned to her. "Of course I want to Katara! I want to know what life could have been like if we-!", he cut off abruptly. It wasn't as if Iroh didn't know all about their secret love affair, but he still felt uncomfortable mentioning it in front of him. "If things had been different. If we made different decisions". "Zuko, that Dream Giving Spirit would try to get you to stay in the Dream World!", exclaimed Katara. "Think about it Katara!", Zuko cried in earnest. "Don't you want to have a taste of what could have been? I dream about it all the time. I think about it every day! Katara, we forsook our destinies our dreams! We could actually live them for a short time!". Katara shook her head unbelievably. "Do you not understand the danger Zuko? We could be trapped there! We'd die there and our souls would be stuck forever!". "That spirit could never convince me to stay in the dream and I know it could never convince you either", said Zuko. "If you think you're going to make a joke about me being stubborn-!", Katara waved a warning finger at him. "No, no", said Zuko waving the idea away. "No, it's because we're parents Katara. We have children that need us. Our love and bonds to our children will keep us planted firmly in the physical world".

Katara considered him for a moment. "Zuko it's still dangerous. And we don't even know if the portal works both ways. And we don't know where it is". "Well we can solve at least one of those now". He

turned to Iroh. "Uncle, where was the portal?". "It was on a long forgotten island at the south of the Fire Nation", replied Iroh. "And is home to a tribe of a very spiritual people called the Bhanti". Zuko and Katara gaped at him. "The Bhanti? That's the tribe Aang said he found!", said Katara. "He said that they even had sky bison". Her excited bewilderment diminished and her stomach slowly dropped thinking of the rest of Aang's letter. Zuko put a steadying hand on her shoulder and she took comfort in his warm touch, as always. "Does the portal work both ways?", he asked. "I would not know", said Iroh, stroking his chin. "But the Bhanti Tribe are very knowledgeable about the Spirit World. If there was a portal somewhere, I believe that they might know the location. Whether or not they will tell you is a different matter". Zuko made a dismissive gesture. "We could deal with that when we have to. But you think that visiting the Bhanti Tribe is the best bet?". Iroh nodded. "Hold on just a minute", said Katara. "I didn't say I agree to going. We have a lot to discussâ€¦like for example, what will we tell the kids?".

Zuko thought for a moment. "Why can't we just tell them the truth? That we're going to the Spirit World?". Katara eyed him incredulously. "Did you hit your head?! They'll have so many questions about what we're doing. They aren't stupid Zuko. Bumi and Kya are sharp and Izumi is the brightest in her class! They'll know something's up". Iroh stood up from the desk. "I think I will go to the kitchen to get some tea". He left the room in such a hurry, there was a tiny gust of wind. "We'll tell them we have to go on a secret mission", suggested Zuko. "We learned something in the Tome of Spirits that requires immediate attention". "Don't you think the kids will wonder why Aang wouldn't take care of something like that? He is the 'bridge between the two worlds' after all". "Aang's got Tenzin doing airbender training in seclusion- who knows where they are and how long it would take a message to get to them! We ****did**** say that it required **i**mmmediate **attention**". "Okay, and what will you say to your Council, Firelord?", asked Katara, hands on hips. Zuko shrugged. "The same thing". Katara tutted. "You don't think this is a bad idea?". "Katara, think! We always wondered how it could've been- now we can actually live it". "For a short time!", Katara retorted. "Don't you think we'll feel worse after? We'll live our dream and then we'll have to leave! You don't think it'll be more painful?". "Isn't that what we always said?", asked Zuko. "We always said that we would have to stay apart or it would be painful, but I always cherished our stolen moments. When I didn't see you it was always worse than when I did see you. Never mind that I knew you had to leave again! I was just so overjoyed to see you".

Katara's face softened and she sighed. "You're right. Every time we were together over the years, even for just seconds, I felt happier because I had another moment with you to commit to memory". Zuko moved closer to Katara and stroked her cheek softly. Katara felt herself melting from his touch. "Maybe this would give us some peace, Katara. It won't be like dreaming, it'll be an actual experience". Katara smiled weakly. "Iâ€¦I suppose we could go", she said hesitantly. Zuko snatched her to him and held her close. Katara folded easily into his arms. "Are you sure? If you have any doubts, we'll stay", he whispered in her ear. She pulled out of their embrace gently to look him in the eyes. "Of course I have doubts, Zuko. We're venturing to a place we've never been- the Spirit World no less. But I think it could be good for us".

3. Chapter 3: THE BHANTI TRIBE

CHAPTER 3: THE BHANTI TRIBE

Early the next morning, Zuko and Katara spoke to the children together about their secret mission in the Spirit World. "Where's dad?", asked Kya. "Shouldn't he be dealing with Spirit World problems? He's the Avatar after all". Bumi and Izumi nodded. Katara hesitated for a moment. "Aang isâ€¦meditating with Tenzin. He wrote to me to say that they can't be disturbed. I don't even know where he is just now". ***(K) That IS the truth of it anyway.**** "A messenger hawk would find him", suggested Izumi. "Yes, but Aang said that he won't be corresponding. He'll never know how serious things are because he won't bother to open the letter", explained Zuko. Izumi nodded. "Zuko and I can take care of this anyway", said Katara. "We've had our share of encounters with spirits". "But what's happening?", asked Kya. "Weâ€¦can't exactly tell you just yet", said Katara. "For your own safety", she added hastily. "I'm a little scared", admitted Izumi. Her bright gaze flicked between Katara's and her father's. "Dad, will you and Aunt Katara be alright? It sounds serious". Zuko leaned down and kissed the top of his daughter's head. "Don't you worry Izumi. Katara and I will get things sorted out and we'll be back before you know it". "I want to go with you", said Bumi looking up earnestly at Katara. "I'm not a little kid anymore. At my age, Dad faced a hundred dangers with you and Uncle Zuko". "That's because the world was different then, it was at war", said Katara evenly. "And your father is the Avatar. He went into danger because he had to, it was his destiny. But you don't have to. You have me and Zuko to keep you safe".

Bumi was sullen, but bowed his head to his mother's ruling. "When will you leave?", asked Kya. "As soon as I speak with my Council", said Zuko. "I wanted to show you a new firebending move Izumi showed me that I added to my waterbending today" Kya pouted. Zuko smiled down at his other little girl. "When we come back you can show me. As soon as we come back I'll come right to you. How does that work for you?". Kya nodded agreeably. Katara smiled at the interchange "Now you three behave yourselves. Bumi, be nice to your sister. And Kya don't pester him". "Yes Mom", said the two in unison. "And Izumi, I need you to help Uncle with any affairs of state that arise in the short time we're gone. After all, you will be Fire Lord one day", said Zuko. Izumi performed a traditional Fire Nation bow. "I will". Katara reached down and hugged her two children to her and Zuko hugged Izumi as well and kissed her forehead. "What should I tell mommy if she comes back before you?", she asked quietly. Zuko felt a small pinprick of guilt at the mention of his wife. "Tell her what I've told you". Izumi nodded dutifully.

After a quick meeting with the Council, Zuko and Katara were off in one of his air balloons. He noted idly that last time the two of them were heading off alone on this same air balloon, they went to Ember Island which resulted inâ€¦Kya. He allowed himself a smile before he removed an old looking piece of parchment from his pocket. "What's that?", asked Katara. "An ancient map of the Fire Nation that I got from the Dragonbone Catacombs years ago. It should have the exact location of the island the Bhanti Tribe inhabits". Katara nodded and they stood in companionable silence, watching the crashing waves beneath them. "I can't believe we're actually going to visit the Dream Giving Spirit", said Zuko wonderingly. "I'll bet no one has been to see her for decades if not centuries". Katara shrugged. "Who

knows? I'm sure at least a few people know of her or have been to visit her". She paused. "Some people may have even chosen to remain in the Dream World". Zuko shook his head. "They must not have had anything to live for the way we do". "They must not", Katara conceded. After a few hours of flying Zuko tapped Katara. "Look! Just over there, do you see it?". Katara looked out ahead of her. A small island, even smaller than Ember Island rose on the horizon before them. "Oh! This must be it!", she exclaimed. As they got closer and Zuko brought them lower and lower, Katara analyzed the scenery. The buildings were a lot like the ones in the Fire Nation, though the design seemed more outdated. Finally they reached the shore.

A few men wearing clothes in a similar design to those of the Fire Sages were waiting for them as Zuko and Katara disembarked from the air balloon. The men bowed and Zuko and Katara followed suit. "Come with us", said one of the men simply and they all turned to leave. Katara and Zuko exchanged glances and shrugged and followed them. It seemed that the Bhandi Tribe lived in a thriving village. Katara heard the familiar groan of an animal and turned on the spot, her heart racing. It was a sky bison alright, but it was not Appa. She had nearly forgotten that Aang told them the Bhandi Tribe had somehow saved and bred sky bison over the years. The men led Katara and Zuko through the village to one large house in the middle. As soon as they arrived a woman, not much older than them appeared in the doorway. The men bowed and so Katara and Zuko followed their lead. "They are from the mainland", said one of the men. "What do you want done with them, Shaman?". Zuko felt his stomach tighten in acute apprehension.
*(Z) What does he mean by 'what does she want done' with us?! **The woman had an unreadable face. He could not tell if she meant them harm or not. She came closer to study their faces as well as if she were trying to figure out the same thing.

She was not a tall woman; she had to stand on her tip toes to peer up into Zuko's eyes. She grabbed his hand suddenly and Katara felt a wave of annoyance that she should touch him at all. Zuko felt a burning sensation coursing through his body as if his blood itself was fire. Abruptly, she dropped his hand. "He is Zuko, son of Ozai, and the ruler of the Fire Nation". Zuko and Katara could not hide their surprise. "How do you know that?", Katara demanded. The woman didn't answer, she just grabbed Katara's hand. Katara felt the same sensation Zuko had felt; veins of fire. The feeling lingered longest at the very pit of her stomach and in her navel. "Oh", said the woman in mild surprise after dropping Katara's hand. "You have been touched by the Avatar". She scrutinized Katara further, peering into her eyes as if she could divine more from the deep blue irises and dilated pupils. "Katara of the Southern Water Tribe", said the woman, still staring at Katara. "The wife of the Avatar. And you've born two of his children". Katara felt her cheeks flush red hot just the way her veins and stomach had felt. This woman knew just from touching her that of their supposed three children, only two were actually his. "How do you know?", asked Katara in a stifled whisper. "There are traces of Ravaa left within you", said the woman simply, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world. "Ravaa?", said Zuko questioningly. "Who is that?".

The woman tutted as if she would not waste her time explaining such an obvious thing. "Why have you come Fire Lord and Katara of the Southern Water Tribe? What business have you here?". She frowned at the two swords strapped to Zuko's back. "Avatar Aang told us about you and your tribe", he explained. "And we were hoping you could do

us a favor". The woman looked skeptical. "And what favor would that be?". "We wanted to know if you could help us get into the Spirit World", said Katara. The woman just stared at them for a moment. "What makes you think we can help? And what business do you have in the Spirit World?", she asked finally. "My Uncle is Iroh of the Fire Nation", said Zuko. "He told us that he came out of a Spirit World portal here decades ago". "We want to visit Coujue, the Dream Giving Spirit", said Katara. There was a small gasp from the men who had brought them to this shaman. "How do you know of Coujue? No mortal has gone to her for centuries. She is not widely known". "I received a book called the Tome of Spirits", said Zuko. "It catalogues almost every spirit ever known". The woman pursed her lips. "The Tome of Spirits you say?". She looked intrigued. Zuko nodded. "A birthday gift from Earth King Kuei from the libraries of Ba Sing Se".

She seemed to be contemplating something. "Will you help us?", asked Katara. "I do not know", said the woman mysteriously. "How can you not know?", asked Katara. "It's up to you". The woman shook her head. "But it isn't". Zuko and Katara didn't even bother to hide their confusion. "Come with me inside", said the woman beckoning them forward. Inside of the house was like a water healers den, but different. And it was stifling hot inside. She gestured to two raised cots and Katara and Zuko laid on them. "I see that you're a healer", the woman said to Katara. "I'm something of that sort. I can read chi paths and spiritual energy using my fire bending and so I can heal with it. It is a sacred art passed down through the generations of my family". ***(K)** How about that? A fire healer. ****** "I have to make sure that there is no dark energy about you before I can send you into the Spirit World. Those with dark energy within will be drawn to Vaatu and he must never be freed". Katara was about to ask who Vaatu was when the shaman made a sharp gesture for her to lay back. "You first". Reluctantly, Katara lay back on her cot. The shaman took a deep breath and little wisps of fire shot out of her fingertips and began encircling Katara. Katara was holding her breath. The fire was so close to her skin it felt like she'd be singed in a moment. "Just relax", said the shaman in a voice devoid of emotion as she was focusing intently on her work. "I'm nearly done". Katara exhaled slowly and closed her eyes and attempted to calm herself.

A few moments later, the shaman sighed and released her fire. "I have finished. I do not sense any dark energy in you". She gestured that Katara could sit up and she headed over to Zuko's cot. She began her reading process again. Zuko was less perturbed than Katara was about the fire, naturally. The shaman squinted as if she were trying to read something written in tiny characters on Zuko's skin. "You too have been indirectly touched by the Avatar", she noted, more like a question. "You are a descendant. I can see a tiny spark of Ravaa's light in you". Zuko nodded although he had no idea what she meant about this Ravaa again. "Be still", she warned immediately. "Avatar Roku is your great grandfather, how interesting". Minutes later she ended her reading. Zuko sat up and the shaman stared at the two of them in an almost accusing way. "What?", asked Zuko, irritated. "The two of you are connected so strongly I could say that you are soulmates. But you are married to the Avatar", she pointed at Katara, "and you are also married", she pointed at Zuko. "And yet, Fire Lord Zuko, I see that twice life has been formed from your body although there is only one heir. And Katara of the Southern Water Tribe, I see that your body has born three children, although only two are born of the Avatar". Katara and Zuko had the grace to look embarrassed. "It's true", said Katara. ***(K)** There's no point hiding what she already

knows. **"Zuko and I have a daughter together". The shaman did not hide her displeasure. "You have both forsaken your marriage vows". Katara and Zuko remained silent. The shaman sighed. "Well, it is not my place to judge your morals. I have seen into your very souls and there is no great darkness in either of you. It is a surprise since you have both betrayed the very essence of light itself, the Avatar".

4. Chapter 4: THE SPIRIT WORLD

CHAPTER 4: THE SPIRIT WORLD

The shaman stared the two of them down for a few more moments until Zuko could bear no more. "We know what we've done", said Zuko. He felt a mixture of irritation and guilt. "But we can't change it now". He looked at Katara and she nodded as if she read his thoughts. "And we wouldn't change it anyway", he added. "Boastful sinners", said the shaman with an amused chuckle. "No matter. I see that the two of you were once destined for one another. You have a bond like the lovers of old who created the caves in the Earth Kingdom to meet in secret. I don't think I have ever seen anything like it". "I love her", said Zuko simply. "More than I love life itself". Katara felt like her heart was bursting at the seams with love for him. "And I him". The shaman made her face impassive once again. "I know. I can feel it. I do not know what happened to you that changed your destiny, but I can only assume that this is why you wish to seek out Coujue. You wish to see what your life could have been if you had not wed elsewhere". They nodded. The shaman scrutinized them. "I sensed a great deal of sacrifice and anguish in the two of you. Perhaps that is why you could betray the light without incurring darkness within yourselves". "We both love Aang", said Katara plaintively. "We never wanted to hurt him. We justâ€¦we couldn't help ourselves. Zuko and I were so deep in love. We still are". The shaman nodded. "I can take you to the portal. I assume you already know the dangers of visiting Coujueâ€¦and you know where to find her?". Zuko nodded. "I have a map. And we know that she'll try to convince us to stay in the dream world". She nodded again. "Yes, she will. Well since you know I assume you have prepared yourselves to withstand her enticements. Follow me".

Zuko and Katara followed the shaman out of her little healing house and through the village. There was a temple-like structure in the middle that closely resembled the temple that Avatar Roku had constructed. She led them inside to and through an ornately carved door embellished with golden dragons and onward into a large nearly empty chamber. In the center there was an extremely large mirror which was made of gold but was otherwise very plain. "Is this the portal?", asked Zuko. The shaman nodded. "How does it work?", asked Katara. "Just walk through it", said the shaman as if it were the most obvious choice. Zuko walked forward and placed his hand gingerly on the glass. "But it's solid". The shaman shrugged. "I have told you what you will have to do". Katara stepped forward and put her hand on Zuko's arm. "Come on Zuko. She said walk through it. Let's just pretend that it isn't solid. What's the worst that can happen?". "I guess", said Zuko wearily. Katara squeezed his hand affectionately and smiled up at him. "I'll wait for you on the other side". She took a breath and stepped into the mirror. At once she felt an icy cold sensation all over her body, like falling through thin ice in the South Pole. Behind her she could see the room she had come from but

it was very blurry. Now she was in something like a jungle. The air was warm and sultry. Seconds later Zuko was beside her.

Zuko smiled and took Katara's hand. "Which way do we go?", she asked. "According to the map, there should be a river around here somewhere. We need to follow it going west". Katara nodded. After a few moments of silence she spoke. "What do you think our dream will be like?". Zuko shrugged. "I guess it should embody everything we ever wanted. The life we wanted with each other". "I'm excited to live it", said Katara. "I know I was hesitant at first, but I'm happy we're taking this chance". "I'm glad you agreed", said Zuko smiling. They cut through a dirt path in the trees. "The Spirit World isn't like what I thought it'd be", said Katara looking around. "We'll have to be careful too", said Zuko. "Aang always said you can't bend here". "Do you really think some spirits might attack us?", asked Katara. Zuko smirked and waited. Katara thought about it and remembered when Hei Bai attacked Senlin Village and when a giant spirit wolf attacked them and when spirit moth-wasps attacked them. And Aang had told her about Koh, the face-stealing spirit. "Okay, okay you're right. Spirits can be hostile. Let's just keep to ourselves and try to stay out of everyone's way". Zuko nodded his agreement. Some birds flew overhead singing cheerfully. Katara shook her head. "It's almost like we haven't left the physical world. It isn't much diff-", she cut off when she saw a spirit that looked like a giant carrot walking only a few feet from them. "Nevermind". Zuko chuckled softly.

"I think I can hear the river up ahead", said Katara after a few more minutes of walking. "We're close". Zuko sniffed the air. It certainly smelled as if a river could be nearby. Soon they reached a clearing and there it was. "So we just go west from here?", asked Katara. Zuko nodded. "According to the map, yes". As they started to walk, they were suddenly encircled by a thick, cool mist. On instinct, both of them took up their bending stances but then realized that of course, their bending was gone in the Spirit World. Zuko took a protective step in front of Katara and drew his broadswords. A figure was coming at them through the mists. "I don't think we can fight spirits with swords, Zuko", whispered Katara. "I'll have to try if it comes to that", said Zuko levelly. "If anything, I want you to run while I distract them". "Never", said Katara in a flat voice, the voice Zuko knew meant she was utterly determined and there would be no arguing with her. The mist began to dissipate some, and Zuko readied himself as the figure stepped forward. It was a female spirit who wore a woven hat and had a crescent moon symbol in the middle of her head and had painted red stripes on her face. Zuko looked at her with curiosity for a moment. "(Z) Could this be..." "It's the Painted Lady", gasped Katara, confirming Zuko's notion. Katara bowed and Zuko followed suit. "It is good to see you again, Katara of the Water Tribe", she paused. "And you must be...", "Fire Lord Zuko", said Zuko. "It is an honor to meet you". The Painted Lady smiled benevolently. "I thank you Fire Lord Zuko, for keeping my river and my village safe and happy all of these years. Now, what brings you to the Spirit World?". "We seek Coujue, the Dream Giver", said Katara. The Painted Lady hesitated. "To visit Coujue is a most dangerous aspiration". "We know, Painted Lady", said Zuko. "But we know the risks and we know how to thwart her temptations".

The Painted Lady regarded him seriously. "I hope you know indeed. Coujue is one who would offer a favorite meal to a starving man and warn him only once that it is poison. And she would not leave it there. If he despaired of the temptation, she would haunt him with

the aroma until he was half mad". "We could never stay in the Dream World, Painted Lady", said Katara. "We have children waiting for us in the physical world. We can't just abandon them and we never would. Our love for our children is stronger than anything". The Painted Lady nodded. "If you are sure, I will take you to her". "You will?", asked Zuko, surprised. She nodded. "Yes". "Thank you, Painted Lady", said Katara solemnly. "Katara of the Water Tribe, you brought hope to my people in that village so many years ago. You healed them and you healed the river. I am forever grateful to you. Know that you will always have a friend in the Spirit World". Katara bowed. "I appreciate that Painted Lady". "And you, Fire Lord Zuko, have turned my little village into a thriving town. And for that you will always have my thanks. Should either of you ever have need of me while in this realm, I will come to your aid". "Thank you, Painted Lady". She nodded. "Remember to keep your wits about you when you visit the Dream Giver. Do not let your guard down for a moment". Zuko and Katara nodded. "I will send you now". The Painted Lady closed her eyes and placed her hands together in front of her as if she were praying. Suddenly, a little ball of light grew from within her interlaced fingers. She opened her eyes and the little ball of light floated towards them. "Take hold of that", said the Painted Lady. "It will take you wherever you need to go within the Spirit World". "We can't thank you enough, Painted Lady", said Katara gratefully. At once she and Zuko grabbed hold of the ball of light.

Zuko immediately felt himself melt away? It was the strangest sensation he had ever felt in his life. The only way to describe it was like feeling your physical body melt away. He felt his own existence, but not his body. *(Z) This must be what it's like to meditate into the Spirit World*. Katara felt like she was floating down a river with a strong current. Only, she couldn't feel the river or anything else for that matter. She could feel that she was alive though, and she could feel that Zuko was with her. Other than that she felt like a disembodied consciousness. The sensation lasted for less than a minute and suddenly she and Zuko were on their feet in a new area, unlike the jungle they had come from. Here in front of them was a forest of sorts. But the trees were all spiraled fantastically in a way that couldn't be natural and it looked like they were littered with jewels. Here, it was twilight although she could clearly see that in the opposite direction, and everywhere else she looked, it was bright sunny daylight. Zuko pulled out the map. "This must be the Dream Forest". Certainly the forest looked completely unreal, beautiful of course, but a fabrication nonetheless. There was a paved path that wound through the woods. "I guess we just follow this".

As they followed the path, they took note of their surroundings. The forest was breathtakingly beautiful, but also quite haunting in its surrealism. Everything was enhanced and embellished far beyond the simple natural beauty of a real forest. Instead of bright chirping songs, the birds sung sweet, evocative, lullabies. The flowers emitted perfume-like fragrances that reminded Katara of that abbey she had gone to when Zuko had used a bounty hunter and her Shirshu to find Aang more than a decade ago. Even the insects buzzed around like little dancing fairies instead of being pests. "This place is strange", Zuko remarked in distaste. Katara nodded. There was something very off-putting about this romanticized version of a woodland. As they delved deeper there was a voice that said "Come". An angelic voice. The most beautiful voice Katara had ever heard. It lingered in the air caressing her ears. "Come". "Do you hear that?",

asked Zuko quietly as they walked on. Katara nodded. "That voice. It sounds like an angel. I've never heard a more beautiful voice. The Painted Lady was right. We can't drop our guards for a minute. When I heard her, I was compelled beyond all reason to run up ahead". Zuko nodded. "Me too". To Zuko that voice sounded like the sweetest enticement and the saddest song all at once. It sounded like the promise of release at the moment of heartbreak. It sounded like light and love and sweetness. He took Katara's hand and held it tightly.

5. Chapter 5: INTO THE DREAM

CHAPTER 5: INTO THE DREAM

The path finally ended and gave way to a clearing. There was a lake up ahead. The only way to cross the lake appeared to be a bridge; an ornate wooden bridge carved intricately and painted red and gold with a golden archway. What was strange was that Zuko could not see anything on the other side of the bridge. "That must be the portal to the Dream World", said Katara quietly as if she had once again read his thoughts. He nodded. "But where's Coujue?". "I am here", said that angelic voice. Zuko and Katara turned to see a woman clad in all white. Really she herself was white as if all of the color had been washed off of her. And she was radiantly beautiful. She even seemed to emit a soft glow of light. Coujue smiled sweetly. "And you are also here now. It has been so long since I have set eyes on mortal men". Zuko and Katara bowed. "Coujue, you are the Dream Giver, are you not?", asked Zuko. She inclined her head. "Yes, that I am". "We came to seek you out in order to live our dream for a time". "Of course you have", said Coujue flashing her dazzling smile. "I can see your dream is a strong one". Katara noticed the swift look of calculation that passed on the spirit's perfect, lovely face and narrowed her eyes. "You are star-crossed lovers", Coujue continued. "How tragic. I can feel your regrets as strongly as if they were my own. I will be glad to give you a rest from your painful, double-lives for a time. You may live your dream for as long as you would like". "Coujue, to be clear, we will want to return to the physical world. We will not stay in the Dream", Katara stipulated. Zuko nodded. "That's right. We have lives out there". "Of course you do", said Coujue, her voice sweeter than a gentle breeze in the heat of summer. "It is just that I have had so few visitors for so many countless years. I will allow you to stay as long as you need and then should you wish to return the world, I will send you".

Zuko looked skeptical and Coujue laughed at his surly expression. Her laugh was like wind chimes and rippling water; soothing and pleasurable to the ears. "You do not trust me?". "No", said Zuko flatly. She just laughed again. "Well, I suppose that is to be expected. You will have been told that I am a villain of sorts". "Of sorts", Katara agreed without inflection. Coujue smiled. "Well I am not a villain. Who would call a komodo-rhino a villain for hunting a koala-sheep?", she reasoned. Zuko and Katara grimaced. Coujue laughed again. "Oh, well of course that is not to call you koala-sheep, but you understand my reference. I am what I am. It does not make me a villain". "How long will we have in the Dream?", asked Katara. "Time does not flow in the Dream the way it flows in the physical world", said Coujue. "In the waking world, a dream can have lasted only seconds, but you will not think it so". "So what's the catch Coujue?", asked Zuko getting to the point. "Why will you let us in

and out with no problem?". She smiled mysteriously and it sent a chill up Katara's spine. "The strength of your dream is quite without match. I have not felt a dream of such caliber for centuries. Even if you stay in the Dream for a short time, it is enough to sustain me for a long time. It will be a good bargain for me". Katara pursed her lips. "If it's so strong why wouldn't you just want to keep us in the Dream forever?". Coujue now scrutinized Katara's face. "I would certainly not object to it if you chose to stay in the Dream. But I have told you. A little of this dream will be enough for me". "Fine. So how does this work?", asked Zuko. Coujue stepped aside and made an elaborate, ushering bow. "You simply cross this bridge and you will be in the Dream". Zuko took a breath and looked at Katara. "Are you ready?". She nodded and placed her hand in his. "I'm ready".

As they stepped onto the bridge, the world behind them seemed to vanish in mist. And then they were in a room. A familiar room.

Katara sighed. "You don't think you're being a little bit hasty?". Zuko shook his head. "I was laying here thinking while you were gone". He motioned for Katara to sit on the bed as he sat with another wince. Katara sat gingerly next to him and peered up into his face. "These people supported my father and my father labeled me as a traitor and an embarrassment. How eager do you think they'll be to follow me?". Katara frowned but remained silent. "Exactly", said Zuko, taking her expression as an answer. "You know that a lot of my people want me dead as it is. I have to show them I am in control and that I have a plan for how to deal with the aftermath of the war. It's the only way to stave off a rebellion before one actually starts. And I have no doubt that one would start. The war was one thing, but everyone was in submission to the Fire Lord. Open rebellion would be chaos that the world can't handle". Katara begrudgingly nodded her head. "I understand. I still think you should be in bed, but I understand why you can't be". She gave him an encouraging smile. "I'll be waiting here for you". Zuko smiled and leaned in to kiss her. "I'll be back as soon as I can and I promise I'll stay in bed then". _

Katara instantly grabbed Zuko's arm. "Wait!". She looked at her hands and examined her hips and breasts with her hand. She was a teenager again. "Zuko, this is what happened right after the Agni Kai with Azula! We're in the dream!". Zuko shook his head in wonderment. He looked at his arms which were smaller than his adult arms. He felt his hair which was short once again. "We're at the very moment that determined our future!", he exclaimed. It was strange to hear his teenage voice. In his mind, his voice hadn't changed much, but now he could hear a clear difference in teenage Zuko's and adult Zuko's voice. Even Katara's voice was somewhat different, but still as lovely as he remembered. "You can't mention your betrothal to me to the council", warned Katara. "Don't even mention a marriage at all". Zuko nodded. He could feel himself welling up with excitement. "I won't. I'll only talk politics and reform". He kissed her fully and Katara felt the dizzy light-headedness and desire she now realized Zuko had always elicited in her, even as a teenager. "I'll be back soon", he promised.

About an hour later Zuko returned, triumphant. "Well, they accepted my plans and negotiations for the release of the prisoners of war". "As I knew they would", said Katara smiling. "I've already unveiled a

plan for new jobs to make sure our economy doesn't waver in the face of change", said Zuko, still exulting. "That's great!", said Katara. He got on the bed and kissed her forehead and then her lips. "We have something hard ahead of us though", she warned. "We'll still have to explain things to Aang and Mai". Zuko had forgotten about that. Even in a dream that would be tough. "Yes, but at least it won't have the ramifications it would've had in the physical world", he reasoned. "That's true", said Katara. "But I imagine it'll still be difficult all the same". Zuko nodded. "We did what we had to for them and for the world last time. But this time we can do what we want to", he said with a smile. "Last time we spent the night together holding on to each other for dear life, knowing it would be the last time we'd be together like that". "Or so we thought", added Katara with a mischievous smile. "Or so we thought", Zuko chuckled in agreement. "All I'm saying is that everything is different this time—and you'll be my wife one day". Katara glowed at that. "And we won't have to hide our feelings anymore and sneak around". "Exactly", said Zuko. "Now let me have the kitchens send a whole tray of fruit tarts up here for you. I swear you'll love them".

The next day came too soon, the sun beaming brightly into the large window of Zuko's bedchamber. Last time, Zuko and Katara had spent the night wrapped in each other, laughing at the times they had together and crying for what would never be. This time however, the day came too soon because Zuko would have to confront Mai. They woke from a dreamless sleep and Katara hurried across the hall to the room she was supposed to have been staying in. As before, the laundresses had brought her Water Tribe tunic to her room and she changed out of her Fire Nation robes. Zuko tapped lightly on the door before letting himself in. This time, there was a bright, encouraging smile on her face. She headed towards him and he drew her into an embrace and kissed her lips sweetly. She frowned after a few moments. "What is it?", he asked. "I don't know", said Katara indecisively. "I don't think you should tell her today. It's a happy day— your coronation, and she was just released from prison—which she only got thrown in for protecting you". Zuko was a little stung with guilt. "I—I know. But I don't want to prolong the pain for her". "I know", said Katara understandingly. "But you don't want to rip her heart out either". Zuko's gaze fell to the floor and his shoulders slumped slightly. Katara touched his hand affectionately. "Hey, it'll be okay Zuko. You'll tell her when the time is right, but that isn't yet. Maybe you should tell her a week from now, like I did with Aang". Zuko sighed. "I guess. But I don't want to pretend to be with her if I don't plan to be". "Just avoid her. Keep yourself busy. For now at least she'll understand that. And it's not like I'll be around either to make anything suspicious because remember, Sokka, Aang, Toph, Suki, and I went to Ba Sing Se almost immediately after and then you and Mai followed". He nodded at her logic. "Well, I guess I'll see you at the coronation banquet", said Zuko heading for the door.

"Wait, where are you going?", asked Katara. Zuko was puzzled. "Back to my room. I have to start getting ready". Katara shook her head. "You can't do whatever it was that you did last time. You said Mai was waiting for you. You have to tell your servants to send your robes somewhere else". "I didn't even think of that", said Zuko rubbing his chin. It was good Katara had thought of that. He remembered now that when he had run into Mai she mentioned that even though she had been imprisoned for high treason, her uncle the warden of the Boiling Rock had called in some favors. And also that being the Fire Lord's girlfriend helped. If he allowed her to say that he

would be leading her on. If he said something so soon, like Katara said, he could severely break her heart. He walked into the big hall and caught a serving girl was carrying laundry. "I know you're busy and I'm sorry to ask this of you, but could you send for my wardrobe servants. Tell them to bring my coronation robes to big guest room on the west wing of the palace". The laundry maid smiled. "Of course Fire Lord. You aren't troubling me at all, but I thank you for even caring about it if you were". Zuko made his way to those rooms taking the long way where he was less likely to run into Mai. It was so strange to actually have a second chance. Even though he knew it was essentially a dream, it made him feel oddly hopeful. Everything he had wanted in life was just within his grasp if only for a time.

Katara got dressed in her Water Tribe tunic and went out to meet her friends and her brother the same way she had done last time. It was strange to relive these moments. Somehow, she still felt joy to see her brother and concern over his broken leg. She still felt relief at seeing her father, and if memory served her correctly, she had even instinctively answered questions and conversed with the same words she had before. Inside the palace Zuko headed towards the entrance to the coronation square and just like so many years before, Aang sat on the soft velvet rug at the entrance. It was strange to see him as a kid again. Aang had grown to be just as tall as he was. Zuko had forgotten how short he had been. Once again, he had no idea what to say to Aang. Aang had grown in to being his best friend, no matter how irresponsible he was towards his parental duties. He probably knew him almost as well as Katara did. Yet, the words had come to him. "I can't believe a year ago my purpose in life was hunting you down", said Zuko. "And now...", "And now we're friends", Aang finished with a smile. Zuko paused, puzzling over how he had managed to say exactly what he had said before. "Yeah. We are friends". Aang stood. "I can't believe a year ago I was still frozen in a block of ice. The world is so different now". Zuko nodded. The feeling of déjà vu was so intense. He walked over and put his arm on Aang's shoulder. "And it's gonna be even more different. We'll rebuild it together". They hugged briefly before Zuko headed out through the red satin curtain with Aang following close behind. It was so paradoxically natural and yet unnatural.

6. Chapter 6: HARD GOODBYES

CHAPTER 6: HARD GOODBYES

Everyone enjoyed themselves at his coronation banquet. He avoided Mai as much as possible, but it was impossible to do it completely. He tried to spend most of the dinner talking to different councilors and other Fire Nation political officers. He spoke to some of the military officers in attendance as well and the now free prisoners of war. Katara found time to slip him a note when she came to bow to him as the new Fire Lord and wish him well. After allocating lodgings for those who were staying the night, Zuko announced loudly that he would retire to his rooms. Katara suggested that Team Avatar do the same. At midnight, she and Zuko snuck out of their rooms to meet up. On seeing one another, they picked up the pace and Katara was in his arms at once. She leaned up and kissed him. "How are you? I saw you trying to keep yourself in conversation with other people during the banquet". "I'm fine", said Zuko. "I don't think she suspects much. I tried to speak to important figures so she would believe I'm just

consumed with state affairs". Katara nodded. "It won't be an easy week. She's going to want to talk to you". "Maybe I shouldn't wait a whole week then", said Zuko. "I think you should", Katara disagreed. "Because you can leave for Ba Sing Se right after. It makes things less awkward". "That's true I guess. Well I'll have to find a way to avoid her. But I feel bad". Katara hung her head a little. "I know how you feel. I can't really avoid Aang. It's strange knowing that I'm going to break his heart this time. I'm actually dreading the moment". Zuko pulled her close and kissed the top of her head. "I know. Me too. We just have to remember that this is a dream".

After a week of excuses, good excuses to be sure, but excuses nonetheless, Zuko knew he would have to confront Mai. He sent her message asking her to meet him in his private rooms. "So, the illustrious Fire Lord finally has the time for me. I'm honored", said Mai sarcastically. Zuko's face was already glum, knowing what he would have to do. He wished more than anything that the words would just pop up in his head like they had with Aang. Zuko was shocked when Mai chuckled shortly. She walked over to him and smiled- the smile she had for only him, and put her hand on his shoulder. "Relax, Zuko. I was just kidding. I know you've been busy getting the country in order". Zuko shifted his gaze to the floor. He could hardly look at her. "Mai I wanted to-", Mai put up a hand to stop him. "Zuko, you don't have to apologize. I know you weren't intentionally neglecting me". Zuko felt guilt slice through him like a hot knife_. __**(Z) Remember it's just a dream.**_ He took a deep breath. "Mai, it isn't that. Why don't you sit", he motioned towards the cushy red and gold gilded chair next to his writing desk. Mai scrutinized his face and sat. "What's going on Zuko? Did something happen?". "Somethingâ€|happened. Yes.". "Zuko, you're being weird. Just tell me what it is". He kneeled down in front of her and grabbed her hands. Mai eyed him suspiciously. "Mai, we've been through so much together. Remember when we were kids and Azula tried to shoot an apple off of your head and I tried to save you". "Yeah. We fell in the fountain together", said Mai impatiently. "What are you getting at Zuko?". "Iâ€|I just wanted you to know that I appreciate what you did for meâ€|you know, back at the Boiling Rock".

Mai smiled tentatively. "I know you would've done the same for me. Even though you never should have left that stupid note for me". Zuko grimaced. "Don't worry, Zuko", said Mai soothingly. "I know that you were trying to do what you thought was right. You were wrong, of course, but I understand". Zuko smiled weakly at her wit. He had loved that about her. "It isn't that either Mai. Just listen to me. I love you. You know that". Mai smirked. "Well you better. I was sitting in that cell in the dark for the longest". Zuko felt his heart sink. No matter what he said or how nicely he said it, he would break her heart. And he'd betray her once again. "I do. And I always will. Remember that. I will always be here for you". Mai narrowed her eyebrows. "Whatâ€|what are you saying?", she asked, a hint of despair in her voice. Zuko had the feeling she knew what he was doing. That didn't make things any easier. She pushed him and he fell back before catching his balance. He remained on the floor with his head down as she stood quickly. "What are you saying?!", she yelled at him, a single tear streaming silently down her face. Zuko was silent. He wanted to speak but he couldn't find his voice. His throat felt all choked up and was burning hot. Mai looked down at him, her face a mixture of hurt, sadness, and anger, as well as bewilderment. "Are youâ€|saying goodbye to me?", she whispered fiercely, her voice shaking with rage and pain. Zuko's head drooped even further. "Zuko,

I gave up my freedom for you!", she hissed. "I know", said Zuko miserably. "I know. I was worried about you. I thought about you all the time but-" "But what?!", she snarled. "What could it possibly be?!". Her face was slightly softened by anguish. "I know you're taking on a huge responsibility here. You're the Fire Lord and there's a lot to do now that the war is over. But I understand that. I don't expect you to have as much time for me as you did before. You're always so self-destructive. Don't push me away because you think I can handle spending less time with you. I spent months in prison without you, remember?".

Zuko continued to remind himself inwardly that this was just a dream. But it certainly felt real. "It isn't that either Mai. I will always be grateful to you for what you did. I don't even know what I can do to repay you. But I can't be with you because I'm in love with someone else". Mai froze and looked at him as if she hadn't heard a thing that he said. Zuko hung his head again. "You...are in love with someone else?", she repeated, quietly as if she were talking to herself. Seconds later she seemed to regain her wits and fixed him with her icy stare. It pierced him as if it were one of her throwing knives. "You're in love with someone else?!", she growled at him in a low dangerous hiss. He couldn't meet her eyes so he stared at his feet on the floor. "Yes", he mumbled, feeling ashamed of himself. He could feel the calm fury rolling off of Mai like heat waves. She shoved him and he fell to the floor again. Her face was a mask of ice, the only betrayal of emotion was in the glistening tears that were flowing silently but copiously down her face. She stood over him menacingly and he felt the tiny droplets of her tears falling in the top of his head. But he deserved what she did and whatever else she might do. He would not resist her. "I can't believe you Zuko", said Mai through clenched teeth. "I surrendered my freedom to save you and you go off and fall in love with someone else while I rotted in a cold cell?!". Zuko couldn't even respond. Mai laughed bitterly. "And then you can't even look me in the face. You don't have anything to say for yourself?". "I'm sorry", Zuko mumbled. He forced himself to look up at her. "I'm sorry Mai. I really am. But you can't help who you love". "You're right", said Mai in her viciously cool tone. "And I'm an idiot for ever loving you. All it got me was heartache and a stint in jail". Mai made a mockingly elaborate bow. "Goodbye Fire Lord".

Katara was having a tough time dealing with Aang for the week. It had been easier the first time, knowing that she had already committed to being with him. But this time, she wouldn't. She wondered how Zuko was doing. ***(K) He and Mai were actually together! At least I never told Aang anything one way or the other. **_It was easy for her to give advice to Zuko, but she didn't know what she would do about Aang. She could just not bring the topic up to him at all, but eventually Aang would bring it up. She felt irritation all over again about how he could be so concerned about being with her when the world needed the Avatar's guidance in the aftermath of the war. She and Zuko had been in love and yet they had given each other up for the sake of the world which was far more important. It gave her a fierce joy to know that this time she could choose Zuko and happiness. Aang had of course been dropping not so subtle hints here and there. Katara regarded him with interest. Here was her husband, a 13 year old kid once again. This Aang who sat next to her had no idea that in the real world they were grown and married and had three children together. ***(K) Well two children anyway.**_ Katara had been friendly as ever to him but it was harder knowing that she would

dash his dreams of a life with her to pieces at some point. It was hard to find a balance between being his friend as she had always been and avoiding the feeling of leading him on. She wanted to be kind, but not too kind, and yet no different from the way she normally was with him.

At the end of the week Zuko arrived in Ba Sing Se for his summit with Earth King Kuei. In a single session, Zuko avoided the mishap of the Harmony Restoration Movement and they began to draw up plans for the government for the remaining Fire Nation colonies. Katara lit up to see him but kept it to herself. Back at Uncle's tea shop the Jasmine Dragon, Zuko was serving tea to everyone just as he had done the first time and Iroh was displaying his skill on the Tsungi horn. It was a different kind of déjà vu Katara realized. Everything was the same but for one factor. Mai was missing. She was sure Zuko felt the strangeness of the relived moment even more intensely than she had. Last time, Katara had tried her best to befriend Mai to show Zuko her support. Suki and Mai had been engrossed in a game of Pai-sho and Katara had been leaning over Mai's shoulder, giving her advice. This time Suki was playing Pai-Sho with Ty-Lee, who had not been there before. Once again Sokka caught everyone's attention. "Zuko! Stop moving! I'm trying to capture the moment", he exclaimed frowning. Sokka still drew Katara with hair loops she had put off wearing months before. He still drew Suki firebending. Everyone made their criticisms and Toph said that she thought everyone looked great, just like before. Aang left to stand outside and Katara hesitated. _**(K) Last time I followed him out and I kissed him. Butâ€¦should I go out there now? *_She glanced at Zuko but he wasn't looking at her. She decided not to go. It was a happy day. The city was in celebration mode and the fireworks would start at nightfall. They should enjoy it.

The next day everyone came down to have breakfast in the shop. Zuko and Katara had gotten up early to help Uncle prepare it. Katara made sure to seat herself between Sokka and Toph so Aang could not sit beside her. She avoided Aang at all costs. She spent the morning at the Fancy Lady Day Spa with Suki and Ty-Lee; Toph had absolutely refused to go again. The afternoon was consumed by waterbending practice and running errands for Uncle. The next day was similar except she spent the morning shopping for new clothes and shoes and the afternoon reading at Ba Sing Se University Library where she idly wondered if the Tome of Spirits was hidden somewhere within. On the third day Aang confronted her. "Uhhâ€¦hey Katara", he started off. "Hey Aang", said Katara amicably. She continued packing a small lunch into her satchel; she planned to be gone all day once again. "Where are you off to?", he asked. "Oh, just around the city", said Katara casually. "Would you like some company? I haven't seen very much of you lately", said Aang. Katara chuckled. "What do you mean Aang? I've seen you every day for more than a week". Aang hesitated. "Kataraâ€¦do you remember what we talked about when we were on Ember Island, at that play?". "What?", asked Katara quickly. She was stalling for time. She felt a fresh wave of annoyance about that whole situation when she had told him she was confused and he had kissed her anyway. "When we were at Ember Island and I asked if we were going to be together", said Aang earnestly, his eyes wide. "Oh", said Katara. "What about it?". Aang shifted his weight uneasily. "Wellâ€¦you told me that we had a war to worry about. And you were right. We did". He paused. "I'm sorry if I made you uncomfortable when I kissed you".

Katara felt a headache coming on. _**(K) You're making me uncomfortable now!**_ "Well, now we don't have a war to worry about now", he continued. "Aangâ€|now is not a good time", said Katara. "I was just on my way out". "When will be a good time Katara?! You told me to worry about the war first. Well Fire Lord Ozai was defeated more than a week ago! We've already negotiated what we can do for the oldest Fire Nation colonies, and Zuko has already made plans for the Fire Nation economy! Everything is on the road to being fixed!". Katara rubbed her temples. _**(K) How could he think that means the world doesn't still need his guidance?! Things can still mess up!**_ "Aang, can't we talk about this later?", asked Katara almost pleadingly. "I'm supposed to go to a haiku reading and I don't want to be late". Aang frowned. "I promise we can talk later, but I don't want to be rude. I was invited. I can't show up late". Aang pouted a little before he nodded his head. Katara gave him a small smile and hastened out of the door. As she walked through the Upper Ring of Ba Sing Se to the haiku clubhouse someone began walking alongside her. She knew at once without looking that it was Zuko. "What's the hurry?", asked Zuko. "I had to get away from Aang", Katara replied shortly, keeping her pace high. "Why?", asked Zuko. "He started pestering me about the conversation we had at Ember Island". "You can't avoid him forever", said Zuko reasonably. "I know", said Katara, frustrated. "He's just so pushy! I didn't want to get upset and say things the wrong way". Zuko nodded. "Anyway I promised I would speak to him later today. He was going to make me late for the haiku readings". "Well, you can hardly blame him. I know you'll say the right thing to him". "I hope I do", said Katara.

At dusk while Zuko helped make dinner, Katara met Aang out on the balcony of the tea shop. It was strange. The last time Katara had spoken to him on that balcony near sunset, she had kissed him, planning to devote her life to keeping him on track. She took a deep breath as she approached him. "Hey Aang". He turned to her and smiled. "Hey Katara". She was confronted anew with the purity of his smile. He had his flaws, but he was a sweet boy. "Soâ€|you wanted to talk?", she asked a little nervously. "Well yeah", said Aang, incredulously. "Kataraâ€|I really like you. I always have. Ever since we went penguin sledding". Katara smiled at the memory and then quickly changed her face to a more demure expression. Aang would be looking for smiles and she could not lead him on. "I'mâ€|flattered Aang", said Katara as soothingly as she could. Silence. But as ever, the silence was so awkward, unlike her nice calming silences with Zuko. "So?", Aang nudged. "Aang, I don't know what to say", said Katara truthfully. "You could say that you'll be my girlfriend", said Aang hopefully, smiling cheekily at her. Katara hid her amusement. Smiling now could be detrimental. "Aangâ€|you're my best friend. We've been through so much together and I've watched you grow up so much", she took a deep breath, "and we'll always be friends". She watched Aang's hopeful expression diminish and she felt her heart growing heavy. "Justâ€|friends?", asked Aang, clarifying. Katara looked down at her feet. "I'm sorry Aang". Aang looked like he was about to panic. "But-but I love you!", he protested. "Aang, I love you too, but not in that way", said Katara looking at him earnestly. "You're my friend, the best friend I've ever had! But I don't haveâ€|romantic feelings for you". Aang winced at that and Katara dropped her gaze back to the floor.

"But we kissed at the Invasion", said Aang in that whiney voice he was prone to when he was arguing a point. Katara was dumbfounded! "Aangâ€|if you remember, YOU kissed ME". "You didn't try to stop

me!", he exclaimed heatedly. "How could I?!", Katara exclaimed back, her irritation rising. _**(K) How can he think he can argue with me over how**_** I**_** feel about him?!**_ "I was stunned. I didn't know how to react! And you were going off to face the Fire Lord, so how could I? When you might not have even come back!". Aang's eyebrows furrowed. "So you didn't believe I could win?!". "Oh really Aang!", exclaimed Katara incredulously. "That had nothing to do with it. None of us knew what would be waiting for us in the Fire Nation! You know I've always believed in you! I always knew you would save the world! I left my home to come with you because I believed in you!". Aang looked away. "Anyway Aang", said Katara in a calmer tone, "all of that doesn't matter. This isn't about that". "So, we won't be together", said Aang, looking back at her. Katara shook her head solemnly. "No Aang, we won't". Aang nodded. "Is itâ€|because you love someone else?", he asked. Katara had been caught off guard by the question. "What? Who could I be in love with?", she asked a little quickly. She was sure he hadn't known about her and Zuko. "I dunno", said Aang, his cheeks red. "Haru maybe?". _**(K) What is up with everyone thinking Haru and I had something?! **_Katara felt relief wash over her and she even chuckled. "No! Haru and I are friends". He looked at her with uncertainty. "Really", said Katara soothingly. "I don't know where anyone ever got that from", she shrugged. Aang seemed to accept that. It was the absolute truth after all. She put a hand on Aang's shoulder. "Let's go back inside". "You go ahead", said Aang. "I'm gonna stand out here for a while". Katara nodded and headed back.

7. Chapter 7: UNWANTED ATTENTIONS

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Katara went to her room in lodgings of the tea shop and threw herself on the bed. She buried her face in the pillow and smiled. She did it. She was free. She was actually free! It was like a heavy burden had lifted itself from her very soul. Of course, she could not rejoice in hurting her friend's feelings. She felt for him. But he would mend eventually, they were still young. Katara still couldn't get over that either. She was young again! Not that she had been very old, but she was a teenager again and she could spend her life with Zukoâ€|for a time. For some reason she slowly was becoming less and less aware of her actual age. It felt normal to be 15 year old Katara again. There was a quiet tap at the door. "Come in", she called. Zuko opened the door. "Are you okay?", he asked. She nodded. "I'm great". "Did you talk to Aang?". "I did". "How did he take it?". She sighed. "He was whineyâ€|and pushy. But ultimately, he took it pretty well". "What did he say?", asked Zuko. "I was really surprised at him at first", Katara admitted. "He actually argued with me about when he kissed me at the Invasion. He basically thought that because I didn't stop him, it meant that I wanted him to kiss me". Zuko was stupefied. "What?!". Katara nodded "I know!". "But how could you stop him? As far as you knew, he was about to face my father!". "Exactly what I said", said Katara. She hesitated. "Heâ€|asked me if it was because I was in love with someone else". Zuko was on alert at once. "Does he know?". She shook her head. "No. He asked if I was in love with Haru of all people. I don't know where everyone gets that idea!". Zuko shook his head. "Anyway, I left him out on the balcony. He wanted to stay out there for a while". "He'll need some time", said Zuko reasonably. "At least things went better with Aang than they did with Mai". "Was it very bad?", asked Katara empathetically. She had wanted

to ask him before, but they had not gotten the chance to speak for long and she knew it would be a long story. Zuko nodded. "It was pretty bad. I'm sure she hates me". "She'll come around eventually", said Katara. "Maybe we'll all be friends one day". "I hope so", said Zuko. He looked out of the small window at the setting sun. "I should go". Katara nodded. "Okay. I'll see you down at dinner".

Dinner was a little awkward. Aang looked so sullen while Sokka and Ty-Lee chattered, not seeming to notice. Suki chatted a little too but she noticed Aang's glum expression and fell quiet. "What's the problem Twinkle Toes?!", asked Toph finally. "You haven't said a thing all night". "What?", asked Aang, as if he were surprised to discover he was not alone in the room. "Yeah Aang", said Suki with concern. "Is everything alright?". "Oh, I'm fine", said Aang, forcing a smile. "I know you're lying", said Toph flatly. "I just don't wanna talk about it", said Aang exhaustedly. Toph shrugged. "Well, we're here for you buddy", said Sokka. "Whenever you want to talk". Aang nodded and pushed his dinner away from him. "I think I'm gonna just go lay down. I'm not feeling hungry". Everyone watched as Aang headed up the stairs to his room. "I wonder what's wrong", said Suki when he was completely out of sight. "Weren't you outside talking to him not too long ago on the balcony?", Ty-Lee asked Katara. Everyone's eyes flew to her and she cursed inwardly. "Yeah I was", she answered truthfully. With Toph at the table she couldn't lie. She would have to tell the truth as vaguely as possible. "Did he say what was bothering him?", asked Sokka. Katara shook her head. "No, he didn't".
_**(K) True, he didn't actually say what he was upset about.
**_"Whatever it is, I think he'll be okay in time", said Zuko. "When he's ready to talk, if he ever is, we'll be here". Everyone nodded. A few hours after dinner was cleaned up and everyone was readying for bed, Suki caught Katara's arm. "Hey Katara. Could we talk for a minute?". Katara was puzzled but nodded. Suki led her to the balcony. There was a gentle breeze blowing and the city was quiet.

"What's going on?", Katara asked Suki as casually as possible. She had seen the way her eyes had scrutinized her when Ty-Lee mentioned that she and Aang had been outside talking before. "I wanted to ask you about Aang", said Suki, going right to the point. "I've never seen him so down before". Katara nodded but remained silent. "Did youâ€¦let him down gently?". Katara's gaze shot up at Suki. "But how-", "A wild guess", said Suki with a sad smile. "I always knew he was in love with you, but I was never sure how you felt about him". Katara sighed. "I felt so bad", she revealed. "Aang is my best friend. I love him so much but I just don't love him in the way he wants me to". Suki nodded understandingly. "Hey, don't beat yourself up about it", said Suki soothingly. "You can't force yourself to like someone romantically and even if you could, you shouldn't". Katara smiled gratefully. "Thanks Suki. I still feel awful about it all though. I hate to see him so sad". She really did. Just because Aang was immature and pushy it didn't mean she didn't care about his feelings. Suki put a comforting arm on Katara's shoulder. "He'll be alright. You're his first love, but he's only a kid. He'll have more chances at love". "I've been telling myself that since I came back inside from talking with him", said Katara. "But I feel better hearing it from someone else". She looked furtive for a moment. "Suki, please don't tell anyone", Katara asked plaintively. "Not even Sokka". Suki smiled encouragingly. "I won't tell anyone. Aang deserves to be able to bring it up on his own terms, if he ever brings it up at all".

The next day Katara was surprised to wake up to find her window filled with flowers. At once she knew they were from Aang. She hoped with all of her being that he was showing that there were no hard feelings. As she readied herself and headed downstairs, her brother met her. "Hey Katara". Katara regarded Sokka for a moment. There was something about his face that made her realize that he knew what had transpired between her and Aang. "Hey Sokka", she replied amicably. "Are you heading out for the day?". He nodded. "Yeah Suki and I are going to see a play". "I hope you have a good time", she smiled as she went past him. "Hold on a minute", he called after her. Katara walked on for a bit before stopping. "What is it?", she asked. Suki was sitting downstairs waiting for him. She smiled to see Katara. Katara bit down her irritation and forced a smile for Suki. "I know what happened with you and Aang", said Sokka quietly. Katara nodded. "I figured you did". "I didn't hear it from Suki if that's what you're thinking", said Sokka. "Aang came to me last night". Katara instantly regretted her irritation with Suki. "What did he say?". "He said that you told him you loved him as a friend and he asked me how he could get you to love him as...more than that". Katara nodded. "I gotta say", said Sokka. "It gives me the oogies just thinking about my little sister liking anyone as more than friends". Katara smirked at him and Sokka made a gesture. "But I told him he's gotta respect your feelings. He can't force you to love him. It has to come from you on your own for it to be real". Katara was surprised. "That was actually good advice Sokka". He gave her an indignant look. "I always give good advice!". He quickly turned to Suki. "Right?!". Suki rolled her eyes. "Right", she agreed in a sweetly sarcastic tone.

"Well I don't think he took your advice", said Katara drily. "What do you mean", asked Sokka. "This morning I woke up to a bunch of flowers in my window". "It could've been someone else", said Sokka defensively. "Like who?", asked Suki rolling her eyes. "Zuko?!". Katara felt her heart jump at the mention of his name in this context. It was ironic that Suki was actually correct...or she would be. But Zuko wasn't the type to just leave flowers. Katara didn't trust herself to laugh it off so she just stayed quiet. "It could've been Zuko", Sokka protested. "Ty-Lee told me that he just broke up with his girlfriend", retorted Suki. "She said it was a bad break up. I'm sure he wouldn't just be littering flowers all over someone's window just yet!". Sokka finally conceded to the logic. "Alright, alright!", he exclaimed gesturing with his hands. "It probably was Aang". Suki smirked and then turned to Katara, smoothing her expression. "What are you gonna do about it, Katara?", she asked with concern. Katara shook her head miserably. "I don't know! I told him yesterday that I just like him as a friend. I don't know why he can't just accept it". She sighed. Suki paused. "Maybe you need to be more...you know, forceful in the way you tell him", she suggested. Katara gave her a bleak look. "I know, and I don't want to. I care about him, I don't want to hurt his feelings. I feel like maybe I should just try to avoid him". "If you want my advice, you should just face him head on and let him know it's not gonna happen". Everyone spun swiftly to see Toph lounging on the floor. "Toph!", exclaimed Katara. "How long have you been there?!". "Long enough", said Toph grinning mischievously. Katara frowned. "Oh lighten up Sugar Queen", said Toph carelessly. "You aren't gonna be doing yourself any favors tiptoeing around his feelings. You'll just end up making yourself crazy".

Sokka considered it. "Toph's probably right", he agreed. "It's better to tell him when your head is clear rather than after you get too

annoyed". "What should I say?", asked Katara. "Just let him know how you feel", said Suki. "I did that yesterday", said Katara in frustration. "Tell him he's making you uncomfortable. He's your friend too, Katara. He won't want you feeling that way", said Sokka. "I guess you're right", sighed Katara. "Maybe you should talk to General Iroh", suggested Toph. "He give pretty great advice". Katara brightened at that. "You're right Toph. I should go and ask him. Thanks guys". Katara left her brother and her friends to go and find Iroh. He was down in the shop kitchen, brewing tea for customers. Nowadays, he had a few employees, but he still enjoyed tea making for his own pleasure. "Uncle, I have to ask you about something". He turned to her with a pleasant smile. "I am honored that you would adopt me as your own uncle, Katara. What is on your mind?". Katara cursed herself inwardly. While she had nearly 100% adapted to the Dream, the real world Katara was still very accustomed to referring to Zuko's uncle as her own uncle. She smiled shyly and he beckoned her to the side. "General Iroh", she corrected herself, "I need some advice on how to deal with Aang...". He waited silently. "He...has feelings for me. And he's my friend, my best friend, but I...", "You do not return his feelings". She shook her head sadly. "I don't. So, I told him that yesterday when he asked me if we could be together". Iroh nodded. "It is best to be honest and upfront when it comes to matters of the heart. How did he take the news?". "I thought he took it pretty well at first...but then this morning he showered flower petals all over my window sill. I think he's trying to win me over". "And you are unwilling to be won over?", Iroh asked. Katara nodded. "I just don't have those feelings for him. I can't force myself to". "No you cannot", he agreed. "So what should I do?", she entreated him. He rubbed his chin thoughtfully and Katara smiled. _**(K) Like uncle, like nephew. **_"It is a delicate situation. You should let him know that he is not the one for you...and then perhaps you can encourage him to find love elsewhere". "So...I should find someone to take his mind off of me?", she asked. He nodded.

"Aang is a young man experiencing his first flush of love", Iroh chuckled. "He believes that there is no one else for him but you, for now". "To be honest, General Iroh, I'm not sure Aang is really in love with me as a person. I think he loves the idea of me". "That is also possible", he conceded. "Often that is what a first love truly is". Katara thought fleetingly of Jet who had been her so-called first love. Just like Aang, she had loved the idea of him. He was cool, strong, and a born leader. But he was also a ruthless extremist, and that she could not contend with. "Sometimes I feel like because Aang puts me on a pedestal, he doesn't give me room to be human", said Katara quietly. Iroh regarded her quietly, his eyes silently assessing her. "Well, I am no expert, but I would say that if that is the case, it is not love that he feels for you. Love is an all encompassing thing. To love another is to love them in their entirety; flaws and virtues, good and bad". Katara nodded. "I agree. The way he loves me just feels like...like obsession", she confessed. Iroh nodded his agreement. "That is very possible. In that case, I think that it may be best to convince him that he does not love you rather than the other way around". Katara's eyes widened at the brilliance of the idea. "You're right Uncle- I mean General Iroh!", she exclaimed. "If he can realize that he doesn't actually love me romantically, then maybe his feelings won't be badly hurt!". Iroh smiled at her burst of energy.

That evening, the group had decided to go see a play. The Ba Sing Se Theatrical Association put on a far better show than the Ember Island

Players. They performed the story of the ill-starred lovers from the legend who created the Cave of the Lovers. It was heart-wrenching and lovely, and the costumes were beautiful- a work of theatrical excellence in every way. The audience gave a standing ovation. As Team Avatar filed into the streets of the Middle Ring, a girl of about 16 years utter a squeal of delight and hurried after them. Everyone turned in mild surprise and interest. Zuko's eyes widened. It was Jin. "Lee!", she exclaimed. "It's so good to see you again!". She stepped back, blushing and nervously adjusting her sleeves. "Or should I say, Fire Lord Zuko". "You know her?", asked Toph. Zuko smiled faintly. "Yeah...I met her when I was a refugee in the city. She used to come into the tea shop my uncle and I worked at". Katara eyed the girl warily. _**(K) She must be Jin.**_ Zuko had gone on a single date with the girl, and kissed her briefly before taking off without explanation. Jin stepped closer to Zuko. He was keenly aware that everyone, including Katara, was watching him intently. "Jin...I-", he started. "Umm...you don't have to apologize, Fire Lord", said Jin nervously. "I know why you felt you had to leave our date before". "Date?!", exclaimed Sokka making a face. "How did you find time for dates while you were plotting our destruction?!". "Shh!", reproved Suki. Zuko grimaced. Katara tried her best not to falter. She had known Zuko had gone on a date with Jin. He had told her months ago. Jin smiled sweetly at Zuko and Katara was struck with her prettiness. She felt an unwanted, and an unfounded twinge of jealousy in the pit of her stomach. "I know you had to hide who you were", continued Jin. "You couldn't let anyone get close to you because they could've found out. But now you don't have to worry about that". She shifted her weight nervously. "So...if you'd like, I was wondering if we could you know, go on another date?".

Aang smiled up at Zuko. "She seems really nice Zuko", he said approvingly. Jin smiled gratefully at him and then took in the tattooed arrow on his forehead. "You must be the Avatar!", said Jin excitedly. "Sure am", said Aang cheerily. "Wow! And all of you must be 'Team Avatar'...that is what you call yourselves right?". The group nodded and made general sounds of agreement. "You guys are heroes! I'm so honored to be in your presence", she bowed. "Well, the rest of the week we'll be busy meeting with Earth King Kuei", said Zuko quickly. "I'm not sure I'll have time for a date". "Oh that won't take all day", said Sokka clapping Zuko on the back. "You'll have plenty of time in the evening". Zuko never wanted Sokka to shut his mouth more in his life. "I don't know", said Zuko persistently. "What if we take longer than we expect? I don't want to have to cancel". "Earth King Kuei would understand", said Aang. "Well...what if Uncle wants me to help at the Jasmine Dragon?", Zuko asked, desperately fishing for excuses. "He'd love to go", said Aang turning back to Jin and ignoring Zuko. Katara felt herself raging inwardly. Zuko wanted to punch something. _**(Z) Mind your business Aang!**_ "Tomorrow evening then", said Aang, still playing matchmaker. "You guys could use a private room at the Jasmine Dragon. That way you can be close by if General Iroh needs anything". "Thanks Aang", said Zuko without inflection. Jin was beaming. "Great! I'll meet you there at dusk". She smiled at the rest of the group. "It was so nice to see all of you". She dipped a quick bow before walking off.

"Why were you trying to avoid going out with her again?", asked Sokka. "She seemed nice and she was really pretty". Suki made cleared her throat in vexation. "But not as pretty as Suki!", he added quickly. "Yeah", said Aang. "And last time you left the date early. You should make it up to her". Zuko's grimace deepened. "I just have

a lot on my mind now", said Zuko vaguely. Ty-Lee looked sympathetic. "Is it because you and Mai just broke up?", she asked. Zuko barely wanted to think of that. It still gripped at his heart and the longer they were in the Dream, the more everything felt real. "That's part of it". "You must have been planning to break up with Mai for a while though", said Suki thoughtfully. "Technically, didn't you break up with her before you left to join us?", asked Sokka. Zuko nodded. "Technically, yes. But that was to protect her". "Look Sparky, you can't punish yourself forever for breaking up with Mai", said Toph. "What's done is done. Live in the present, why don't you!". Zuko couldn't help but smile at Toph's crude analysis of the situation. "In some ways, I think Toph is right", said Aang. "Maybe you reconnected with Jin for a reason". Zuko shrugged almost dismissively. Aang smiled. "I think that even when there are obstacles, when you're destined to be with someone, it'll happen". Then, he gave a meaningful look to Katara. She almost gaped openly at him. Did Aang really think they were destined to be together?! Suki noticed and looked at her with concern. "Katara, you've been so quiet. Are you alright?". "Yeah", said Katara, as calmly as she could. She even gave her a bright smile. "I've just been listening". Suki nodded. "Well I think if Zuko needs time, he should take it. He can't force himself to go on a date if he's not ready", she said. "I agree", said Katara.

Back at the lodgings at the Jasmine Dragon, Zuko tapped lightly on Katara's door. She quickly opened it and admitted him. "This is a disaster", he whispered shortly, sitting on the wooden floor. Katara nodded as she sat cross-legged on her little bed. "I know". "What do I say to her?!", he whispered fiercely. He cradled his head in frustration. "Ugh! I can't believe I have to do this again!". "Shh! Keep your voice down", whispered Katara. "Sorry", said Zuko quietly. "Well at least Aang is out of the way". Katara gave him a glum look. Zuko frowned. "What?", he asked quickly. "What happened now?". "He isn't giving up, Zuko", said Katara, irritated. "He thinks that it's just an 'obstacle' to our destiny that I said I don't have romantic feelings for him". Zuko's jaw dropped. That had to be the most delusional thing he had ever heard. "I talked to Uncle", Katara continued. "He says that I should try to convince Aang that he doesn't actually love me. It's more like he's obsessed". Zuko nodded. Then he smiled. "Well, it's hard not to be when it's you". Katara's lips quivered on a smile. "Don't joke. It's serious". "Okay, okay I know", said Zuko. "Well, how are you going to convince him?". Katara shrugged. "Uncle suggested that I also try to find someone else for him to focus his attention on". "That could work", said Zuko reasonably. "It's a big city and I'm sure there are lots of girls his age that he'd like that would like him". Katara nodded. "What are you going to do about Jin?", she asked. Zuko sighed. "Well, it can't be as bad as a break up. Maybe I'll just tell Jin that I just had a bad break up and I'm not ready to date anyone". "That's a good idea", said Katara. "Believable, and partly true". "Yeah". Zuko looked thoughtfully at Katara's little window where a few flower petals were scattering in the breeze. "Those from Aang?", he asked. "Yeah", said Katara wearily. Zuko shook his head. _** (Z) Aang really needs to get a grip.**_ "Who knew that it would've been like this if we changed our minds and stayed together". He turned his gaze back to Katara. "I thought I'd have to break up with Mai, and you'd have to confront Aang, but that was about it". "I know", said Katara. "This Jin thing is unexpected but we'll get through it. We'll get through everything. This time we've taken our destiny back".

End
file.